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COUNTERPOINT?

THE PROBLEM whether or not the Greeks had any kind of counterpoint or harmony has been so fierily discussed—if discussion it is—that the reader occasionally wonders at the high spirits of both parties. Science is, after all, interested in finding the truth rather than in carrying some preconceived opinion through and defaming the opponent's character.[32]

The champions, for all that, fought blindfold, since they were not aware of the only comparable facts: the polyphonic forms of the primitives and of the ancient Orient. One cannot answer this difficult question with fugues and dominant chords in mind.

Even so, most evidences in Greek texts remain ambiguous. The only uncontested fact is negative: the Greeks had no vocal polyphony except those octave parallels forced upon singing by the co-operation of high- and low-pitched singers in choruses.[33]

Things were different in accompanied vocal pieces and purely instrumental music.

Preclassical accompaniment was simple, and all attempts to find evidence of harmony for that period in a certain passage of Aristoxenos[34] were failures. The only conclusion possible is that Olympos and Terpander, the legendary patriarchs of Greek music, played notes in the accompaniment that they omitted in the melody (which is also true of the Euripides fragment, Ex. 75). We do not know how closely the instrument followed the voice; but we know for certain that the strict unison that most modern authors have claimed for preclassical times is out of the question. Unison is neither usual nor even natural—nowhere in the primitive or Oriental world has such a practice existed. The role of instruments is often confined to just restriking the main note, to adding a short *ostinato* motif, or to playing 'heterophonically,' that is, in our own words, to interpreting the same melody according to the personal tastes and abilities of the players

[32] The earliest monographs: Fr.-Jos. Fétis, "Les Grecs et les Romains ont-ils connu l'harmonie simultanée des sons?" in *Mémoires de l'Académie Royale de Belgique*, 1859. A.-J.-H. Vincent, *Réponse à M. Fétis*, Lille, 1859. A. Wagener, *Mémoire sur la symphonie des Anciens*, 1863(?).

[33] Cf. Aristotle's *Problemata* 19:18.

[34] Plutarch, *Perì mousikḗs* ¶ 18.

and to the special conditions of their instruments without caring "for the consonant, or at least pregnant, character of their collisions."

The term *heterophony* has been borrowed from the Greeks themselves. But it unfortunately seems to have had a quite different meaning in Greece. Plato uses it in the *Laws:* a music teacher, he says, who trains boys from nine to twelve years old, should simply double on his own lyre the melody that the pupil's lyre plays; he had better refrain from *heterophony,* without answering closer by wider intervals, lower by higher notes, speed by slowness.

Some scholars, firmly determined to oppose the idea of Greek polyphony, have not been afraid to insist that, far from being an evidence of polyphony, this passage clearly testified to heterophonic paraphrase (in the meaning that modern terminology gives to this word). I do not share their belief. Whoever practices heterophony takes the two melodic lines for similar "without caring for the consonant or at least pregnant, character of their collisions." Plato, on the contrary, insists on their difference; the accompaniment he has in mind is willfully dissimilar in intervals, pitches, rhythms, and number of notes; and various intervals, 'symphonic' and 'antiphonic' (whatever these terms mean) are expressly indicated.[35] Several hundred years later, probably in the first century A.D., the pseudo-Aristotelian book *Perì kósmou* still clings to the same differences: "Music mixes high and low, short and long notes *in different voice parts* [*phonaîs*] *to achieve one harmony.*"[36] It would be scarcely possible to find a clearer description of what we call a mixed two-part counterpoint.

These counterpoints had not always the proper transparence. Athenaios 14: 618 warns a piper: "Wherefore you and this girl shall go on with this piece . . . where you are to play together, or where you again play separately, there'll be no do together—no riddles—to make each part clear."[37]

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THE AUTHOR PSEUDO-LONGINUS asserts at about the same time that melody —the *kyrios phtongos* or 'regal voice'—is usually "sweetened" by the two 'paraphonic' intervals, the fifth and the fourth.[38] This is an unmistakable testimony to the frequent use, not of functional chords in a modern sense,

[35] Plato, *Laws* 7:812 D-E.

[36] J. Handschin, "Musikalische Miszellen," in *Philologus* 86 (1930), p. 57.

[37] *οὔ τε κοινόν ἐστιν, οὔ χορὶς πάλιν, συννεύματ', οὐ προβλήματθ', οἷς σεμαίνεται ἕκαστα.*

[38] J. Handschin, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

to be sure, but of consonant notes, just as in East Asiatic, Babylonian, Egyptian, and medieval music.

Pseudo-Longinus, who probably wrote in the first century A.D., is a comparatively late witness. But we know from Plutarch that even those whom he called "the ancients" played *c′* in consonance with *f;* the higher *e′,* both in dissonance with *d′* and in consonance with *a;* and *d′,* in dissonance with *c′* and *b* and in consonance with *a* and *g*.

Such rudimentary harmony must have been the rule; for Plutarch relates that those musicians who opposed the enharmonic genus put it to "the incompatibility of quarter tones with consonance."

Only six intervals were called *symphonies* or consonances: the fourth, fifth, and octave and their higher octaves. Terminology, however, varied: Theo of Smyrna, an author of the second century A.D., called the octave and the double octave *antiphonies,* and the fourth and the fifth, *paraphonies;* maybe half a hundred years later, Gaudentios understood paraphony to be an interval neither consonant nor dissonant, such as the tritone and the major third,[39] while Aristides Quintilianus defined the octave as *homophony*.

The ancient definition of consonance had a remarkably modern flavor. "If symphonic notes sound *together* on stringed or wind instruments," Gaudentios said, "the lower one, in relation to the higher, and the higher, in relation to the lower one, form a unit. We call them symphonic, as the two notes melt into oneness." Bacchius found a more concise wording for the same idea: consonance is the combination of two notes in which neither seems to be higher or lower than the other. Boethius, however, gave the best definition: in a dissonance, each note is expected to go its own way, that is to say—to quote Grove's nice definition of the term *discord*—dissonance is "a combination of notes which produces a certain restless craving in the mind for some further combination."

Consonances, Boethius says, are "pleasant," and the pseudo-Aristotelian Problem 19: 13 states that "any consonance is sweeter than a single note." And are we supposed to believe that the Greeks did not use them?

[39] Gaudentios, "Eisagoge," in Carolus Janus, *Musici Scriptores Graeci,* 1895, p. 17.

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ACCENTS AND RHYTHM

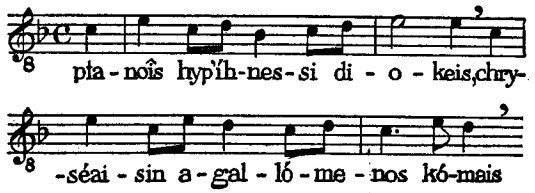
GREEK VERSES have two kinds of accents, which may be distinguished as melic and metric:

Melic *Chi-o-no-ble-phá-rou pát-er a-oûs*
Metric ⏑ ⏑ ´ ⏑ ⏑ ´ ⏑ ⏑ ´ –

This initial verse of the Hymn to the Sun clearly shows the dualism of accents: the two acutes and the circumflex, inseparable from the words themselves, and the longae, stressed by the specific meter of the verse in which they gather.

At first sight, the second accent seems to kill the first; modern readers would indeed, in reciting the verse, obey the poetic meter and entirely neglect the natural accents of the words. But they would be wrong. Ancient recitation, whether sung or spoken, did justice to both accents; the poetic meter shaped its rhythm, the word accents affected its pitches.

The three accents—acute, grave, and circumflex—were indeed symbols of tonal inflections which, as in Sanskrit and Chinese, were essential qualities of the ancient Greek language. They helped to indicate high, medium, low and rising, falling, level pitch.

These tonal inflections were respected unless they interfered with purely melodic conditions. The acute was often rendered by a higher note: in the first lines of the Hymn to the Sun, for instance, twelve out of sixteen acutes are marked by ascending steps. Exceptions are easily explained; in the same hymn, the accented syllable of the word *agallómenos* is lower, instead of higher, because the composer wished to assimilate this portion of the melody into the previous *íchnessi diókeis*.

Ex. 84. HYMN TO HELIOS